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S.H.I.B.G.B.'S

A venue laid to rest

Photos & text
by Alex Kress

The Toronto Hardcore Punk Scene announces with sadness, the death of S.H.I.B.G.B.'s.

That's what the funeral program-flyer read for the final show at the short-lived DIY venue. On October 30, 16 bands played what would be their last-ever sets in that space. The show had no set-times—bands drew their names out of a hat and had a ten minute set. Go over ten minutes? Risk having the power cut on you.

Swept under the rug of the west end's industrial Geary Avenue of garages and warehouses, S.H.I.B.G.B.'s sat below street level for a year and a half hosting over 60 shows. During that time, an almost-even split of 170 touring and local bands played. But in the end, the setup of the operation did not favor the long term. A decision was made to draw the curtain on the short, but beloved run of a hub for punk ideals.

S.H.I.B.G.B.'s was the brainchild of Not Dead Yet festival founder Greg Benedetto. With a long and storied past booking shows in transient spaces, he's no stranger to the shutterings of DIY venues. He cut his teeth on spots like the Adrift Clubhouse, and Siesta Nouveaux most recently, which was forced to close in March 2012. A developer bought up the building in a move toward what would've been the biggest condo development in Toronto. Ultimately, the city denied the project, leaving an empty lot where Siesta stood.

Benedetto waxed romantic about the loss. He eulogized the space in a post on his Not Dead Yet Tumblr, which was also published in a zine dedicated to Siesta released at the final shows. At the time, he said no venue meant more to him in all his years in the Toronto scene.

"While I'm certain that the people who have utilized it over the last several years will go on to further contribute and participate in Toronto's musical community, its loss has me wondering if and where such a positive, welcoming, eclectic and supportive space could pop up again in this city, if at all," he wrote.

"If and when it does, I hope it means half as much to those people as Siesta did to our scene." Two years later, less a day, that's exactly what happened.

And of course, it didn't just happen. Benedetto phoenixed S.H.I.B.G.B.'s from the ashes of Siesta as a labor of love, and with some help. Long-time friend Andy Weaver was one of the first to step up.

"I was pretty much in conversations with Greg from the time we started talking about getting a space that we should do it the best we can, and do it together. Because I knew there was no way anyone was going to do anything like that by themselves."

He says as soon as he saw the space, he knew it would work. He helped build the jam room, bar and slightly

elevated stage. And he missed a lot of sets preventing people from hanging out in front, making sure the shows stayed incognito.

Weaver's dedication to S.H.I.B.G.B.'s didn't go unnoticed.

"Andy was always there and always willing to help. He was one of the only people who never found another excuse," says Benedetto.

As another person with a history in the scene, Weaver says the space was the best thing to happen to Toronto's punk community in a long time.

"The amount of participation from kids all over the city—guys, girls, queer kids...it's been phenomenal.

"We were really stuck in a bad wave of the same kind of music and the same kind of bands. Giving them a place to do it was paramount. Those places don't come around that often."

It's true, they don't. But as Benedetto says he knew getting into it, these kinds of spaces are subject to the same capital constructs that everyone else is. And after some time passed, it just became too expensive to run as a business that ultimately wasn't welcome. However, this time it wasn't a condo developer forcing the closure.

"The reality is we were scraping by," says Benedetto.

"It was my decision to not go into further debt. Fact of the matter is that the city wasn't invested in it as a space existing, it was invested in it insofar as it being entertaining to them when it was comfortable for them."

It's a fickleness Benedetto describes as being innately Toronto.

"A lot of people in Toronto have a bit of an inferiority complex. It's a bit of the midwest thing where it's like, we're not New York, we're not Boston, we're trying to find our identity and as a result it causes people to not really invest in anything.

"Maybe that's me sounding a bit bitter, but I do think there's a part of punk where people don't really see the forest for the trees. People would bring their own beer. We were running a bar to save a couple bucks, and the reality is if they were spending a couple bucks at the bar, that would've been the difference", he says.

In the same vein, Benedetto wouldn't have set rules banning bringing in booze. He just held out hope people would get it.

"And it's not to say that they didn't, but the real estate market creates an unfair situation to people like us who are not trying to be something that's based around capital. But the reality is, we're still subject to it and we don't set the prices and we don't set the market. But we have to exist within it."

He feels somewhat ridiculous choosing to give up the space run by a landlord who was down with what they were doing—especially in contrast with the way Siesta fell. S.H.I.B.G.B.'s was hard to find, so to let it go seems illogical in one sense. But he doesn't regret the decision; he'll no longer feel a constant pressure to book shows to pay the rent.

"Maybe some people who frequented the space will feel some sort of hole and they'll have the drive to go do it. That's kind of how it's supposed to work."

Enter: Faith/Void.

That's S.H.I.T. vocalist Ryan Tong's new record shop that, less than a month after opening, doubled as a gallery space with its walls on wheels for the Not Dead Yet art show. When he lost his job in December of last year, Tong visualized the initial concept for the shop as a part of S.H.I.B.G.B.'s. But when the possibility of the venue staying open began to seem grim, Tong started looking elsewhere.

"It really bummed me out initially, and I felt that loss immediately and I was like, 'someone has to do something, someone has to step up, someone has to save this, this needs to keep going.' I remember feeling that so strongly," he says.

Besides playing and rehearsing in the space, Tong was knee-deep in the less glamorous moments. He says he attended all but about three shows in the nineteen months S.H.I.B.G.B.'s put them on, working the bar, keeping the kids in line, and cleaning up vomit.

"I remember one particular instance when I was crushing cans and I put my hand in this like, hot and sour soup," he laughs. "All the stuff people wanna be doing on a Saturday afternoon."

Still, his love for the space affectionately referred to as 'S.H.I.B.'s' (sheebs) by many who frequented it, is pure as the driven snow. "I feel like nothing else has more profoundly engaged me or impacted the way I see things," he says. "It



made music better, it made art better. It engaged people to act on their own and be inspired enough even to just play in a band or go out on a limb. It reinvigorated this energy and this enthusiasm that I hadn't felt toward music and music communities in a long time."

Fuelled by that reanimation, he says he also feels driven to carry on what the community was doing with S.H.I.B.G.B.'s sheer force of being one of the largest, youngest punk scenes.

"Of everywhere I've been, I've never seen anything quite like it."

Benedetto shares the sentiment; he says after this year's Not Dead Yet festival he was driving London label-runner Paco of La Vida Es Un Mus to the airport when he asked, "How are there so many young bands in Toronto?"

"I kind of drew a straight line to me meeting Warren and putting his band on a show eight years ago to the bands that exist now," he says.

Benedetto says S.H.I.T. guitarist Warren Calbeck got in underage to a Jay Reatard show and was out front smoking. He asked if his then-band Molested Youth could play one of his shows. It sparked several offshoot projects with other young punks—Benedetto named about nine right off the bat—and the rest is history.

"I almost feel like I need to make a family tree of this stuff. All those things happened at Siesta so it's weird that you now can look back in time and say, because of these spaces, these things are able to exist. It's all because these people have hubs to go to."

He says the scene that has disseminated from Siesta and S.H.I.B.G.B.'s is one that has focused on creating a music community with kids who have grown up in Toronto to contribute as artists in the city.

Sadie Rapson is one of those kids. Having played in several of the bands Benedetto rattled off in the Toronto punk family tree that came from the Siesta womb, she's now been through the closure of both it and S.H.I.B.G.B.'s.

"I know Sadie is at that peak age where she's super radical and she'd probably hate that I say this, but I see a lot of how she thinks and acts in how I used to think and act. So I consider her a very valuable checkpoint in that sense," he says.

"I just see that same sort of bewilderment at the systemic injustice that is pervasive in the world—that sort of, 'how is it possible that no one else is this angry' kind of thing."

Rapson plays guitar in Triage, a band who played its first show at S.H.I.B.G.B.'s. She also got a ton of attention for an uncharacteristically inflammatory night in July at the venue that happened to be recorded. '90s hardcore band Chokehold played, and guitarist Jeff Beckman prefaced a song with thoughts on the Black Lives Matter movement. Rapson accused Beckman of being racist and white supremacist, saying, "police violence disproportionately targets black communities," and that he was "minimizing the impact of police violence on black communities."

Rapson says things escalated and Beckman punched her twice in the face. While it's a situation not representative of the space, she says she felt less comfortable, particularly being a trans woman, in the days that followed.

"It kind of reminded me that my safety even in a punk situation is very much dependent on who else is there." She says it wasn't the usual S.H.I.B.G.B.'s crowd. But for her, that's not the lingering memory that will be its legacy. It's not what the Toronto scene is about.

"We have our own thing going, and what it is might be kind of scattered and a little nebulous, but I think it's still fairly distinctive. Enough so that people travel here from elsewhere to catch the realness."

Triage frontwoman Lia Lepre and Dilettantes bass player Mackenzie Burgess are two other young punks full of piss and vinegar who've come up in that described realness. They've got their own heartstrings attached to S.H.I.B.G.B.'s, having both played first shows with bands there. But they're also pragmatic about the fleeting nature of DIY spaces.

"Even at the beginning I remember Greg saying 'well, we'll see how long this lasts'," Burgess says. "But I think in punk there is this sort of sense of urgency that people have. To me, punk's about doing things even though the odds are stacked against you. It was a really great space and it will be missed, but I feel like it was just a space for these things to happen; these things are happening without the space, and they'll continue to happen."



Burgess feels the closure is a loss in that there's now one less place to book a show. And it's hard to get a satellite image of a situation while still in the thick of it. But, at the moment, she sees the future of S.H.I.B.G.B.'s lying with Faith/Void, set up to carry the torch.

Lepre echoed that, saying having temporary spaces drives up the intensity, urging people to push boundaries. S.H.I.B.G.B.'s had already opened when Lepre moved back from Montreal, a scene that was, in her experience, inaccessible and uncomfortable. When she got her wheels spinning back in Toronto, she was at as many shows at S.H.I.B.'s as she could make.

"I think it raised my standard," she says. "It made me experience [that] it's possible to do shows and do them yourself and do them very well. To get people out to them, form bands out of thin air, and not have to rely on someone else to make those things happen. That's really powerful to me. I think I'll maintain that standard going forth with everything I do."

Still, despite healthy doses of contributions from the community, the chaotic lottery-style finale gig at S.H.I.B.'s didn't pan out the way Benedetto had imagined. He expected everyone to hang on right to the bitter end.

"That show was a great example of the space. It was packed when it was comfortable and convenient for everyone, but at the end of the day, at the end of the

show, it was a marathon for a very small number of people," he says.

"People played and then they left. So then, what's the investment if no one's really attached to it? Or that's at least not how it appears to manifest. I'm sure people will eulogize and miss it after the fact, but I don't know that as a community we really focused on keeping the space."

Ultimately, he says, what it came down to was that it was unsustainable in its form. His underlying tone consistently being: Toronto's a tough audience to crack. "Just because people don't feel the need to be there 100 per cent of the time, it doesn't mean that they're not invested. But it's certainly that sense of, 'I can't relate to any of this. Because, how am I the only person who thinks it should be this way?'"

"I still feel like I can't relate to things, in no different a way than I did when I was 18. Especially in this situation where I get final say, I can't help but feel like I'm a bit of an island, always."

When Siesta closed, Benedetto wrapped up his ode to the space with a foggy look at the future, "It's hard to think about what will happen when Siesta is gone. I keep telling myself that this moment will help galvanize the scene. As trite as it sounds, only time will tell."

And, so it goes.



Prom Nite

Wildside

Absolut

Ryan, Andy, Greg

